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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN BERMAN MEETS WITH DAMASCUS DECLARATION
REPRESENTATIVES

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 00482
[B.](#) 08 DAMASCUS 00517
[C.](#) 08 DAMASCUS 00885

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In a pull-aside meeting at a February 21 reception hosted by CDA at the Ambassador's Residence, Representative Howard Berman, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) and HFAC Senior Professional Staff Member Alan Makovsky met with Jumana Seif (strictly protect), the daughter of Damascus Declaration National Council (DDNC) member and former parliamentarian Riad Seif, and Shaykh Nawaf al-Bashir (strictly protect), current treasurer for the Damascus Declaration movement (DD). In addition to briefing the Congressman on the history and current status of the DD, Seif and Bashir outlined the DDNC's perspective on, and support of, the prospect for U.S.-Syria re-engagement, with the caveat that human rights and democracy should not be relegated to second-class issues. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND BRIEF

[¶](#)2. (C) Shaykh Nawaf al-Bashir, reading from a prepared statement, described how the DD (published in 2005) was the natural result of a political and cultural movement born during the Damascus Spring of 2000. The DD formed, Bashir said, as an umbrella organization for a wide spectrum of social, political, and cultural parties and figures committed to a "peaceful, gradual democratic change from a totalitarian state into a civil democratic state, a state of law and rights for all citizens." In contrast to the autocracy of the Syrian regime, Bashir noted, the leaders of the DD's various institutional components (National Council, Secretary General, and Governorate Committees) were democratically elected, including representatives of branches in the U.S. and Europe. The DD believed, he elaborated, "totalitarianism is the essential crisis under which Syria and neighboring countries suffer; that it (totalitarianism) stands behind and generates terrorism." DD members supported the evolution of democracy in the region, March 14 forces in Lebanon, and viewed the political process in Iraq as promising, he said.

WHAT KIND OF U.S. ADVOCACY?

[¶](#)3. (C) Of the many DD leaders in prison, Riad Seif and DDNC Secretary General Fida al-Hurani were the most important, Bashir stated. Yet, despite their imprisonment and the constant security threats surrounding activists, including

the death from torture of Muhammad Amin Al-Shawa (a 30-year old member of the DD), the DD had managed to remain intact and continue its work. Chairman Berman asked whether it would be better for U.S. government officials to make public appeals for the release of Riad Seif, or if it were more efficacious to approach the SARG quietly. Quiet, unpublicized pressure, Bashir responded, was preferable. The regime, he said, was arrogant and had to maintain its standing in the eyes of its people. Public pressure would only make it refuse, he said. When the relationship between the U.S. and Syria was good, he continued, the atmosphere was easier; when it worsened, the crackdowns were harder. Seif commented, "For my father and my family everything is clear and we don't mind a public statement. But my father is one individual who is part of a group. For the sake of the group, a soft approach would be better." Seif went on to discuss prison conditions for prisoners of conscience, noting they were put into large cells with extremely hardened criminals and denied the right to read or write. Her father, she said, was currently in a cell with 50 other convicts, all of whom had been instructed by prison officials not to speak to him. She continued by outlining her concerns regarding the complete lack of information on Seidnaya prison following the July 7 riots (ref A, B, C). Chairman Berman asked if Riad Seif had visitation rights. Seif replied that she and her family saw their father every couple of weeks for between 15 and 30 minutes. They were not permitted to touch him; he always remained behind bars during the visit; and prison guards were always present, making it impossible for Riad Seif to speak openly about prison conditions.

RE-ENGAGEMENT VS. HUMAN RIGHTS

14. (C) Regarding current and future U.S.-Syria relations, Bashir said DD members knew the U.S. had a vital role to play in creating regional stability and democracy, and supported its re-engagement with the SARG. He argued the DD well understood how relationships between countries were strategic and based on shared interests. At the same time, he admitted, the DD hoped any reinvigorated relationship would not come at the expense of the Syrian people. When Chairman Berman asked Bashir to clarify this point, Bashir explained the DD encouraged U.S. involvement with Syria, but hoped there wouldn't be a deal between the two governments in which human rights issues were bargained away. Again pressing for clarification, the congressman asked: "then you think this should be on the agenda. You don't want the U.S. to drop human rights as part of a deal for peace between Israel and Syria, for example." Bashir responded, "yes, but we support this process, and we look forward to seeing normal relations between Syria and Israel. We see it as natural to have ties between the two nations."

15. (C) Following up on Bashir's assessment of the place of human rights in future U.S.-Syria relations, Jumana Seif said she mostly agreed with Bashir, but felt that human rights should be at the top of the agenda in all future negotiations and not placed further down the list. "This regime is very clever at promising and then postponing the fulfillment of its promises," she said, adding that she hoped the U.S. wouldn't fall into the same trap the Europeans had with the SARG.

16. (C) Chairman Berman acknowledged human rights was an important issue but part of a complex matrix of issues, which were not always resolved to our satisfaction, even with allies. He pointed to Egypt as an example of a country with which the U.S. had a strong relationship but which still engaged in human rights abuses. Egypt, he noted, had made peace with Israel and opposed Hamas and Hezbollah, but it did not have a democratic system and continued to punish dissident voices. Chairman Berman observed the U.S. could pressure the GOE into releasing one or two individuals, but most activists remained in detention; nevertheless, human rights remained a priority issue about which the U.S.

continued to engage the GOE. "Sometimes having a good relationship doesn't produce a lot of change with regards to human rights," he said. Seif replied, "I believe dialogue is the best tool, even if it doesn't result in immediate change.

Having a relaxed dialogue will give the U.S. the right to ask for more" at a later point.

ASAD'S UNFULFILLED PROMISES

¶7. (C) Recalling Bashir's earlier comments on the Damascus Spring, Chairman Berman asked what became of Asad's initial leniency and promise of reform? He said when Asad first came to power many felt he favored a greater level of openness than his father had, and Asad had made promises to that effect. "Was he lying? Or did people around him force him to act" differently? Bashir recounted meeting Asad in 2000 in Bashir's capacity as a tribal shayk (he is a shaykh in the roughly 800,000 member Baggara tribe) and member of parliament at the time. "I met the President," he said, "I understood from him that he had a promising project for the country. He said there would be political and economic openness and media transparency. We were astonished to see the political forums (that sprung up during the Damascus Spring) closed, the movements stopped, and the subsequent arrests. What he said was one thing, his deeds were another."

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Both Seif and Bashir appeared pleased to have had the chance to meet Chairman Berman and share the DD's perspective on human rights and U.S.-Syria relations with him. It is worth noting that in coming to the Ambassador's residence, both Seif and Bashir put themselves at no small personal risk. After learning about the meeting, Riad Turk, a well-known Damascus Declaration signatory who had spent 18 years in prison for earlier political opposition, expressed an interest in attending as well, but for fear of SARG reprisals deemed coming to the residence too great a risk. The concern that a revived U.S.-Syria dialogue will require dropping human rights as an agenda item is one we have heard from nearly all of our human rights contacts. Bashir's and Seif's advocacy for a "softer" approach on human rights

issues, one in which individuals are not singled out at the expense of the group, reflects a growing consensus among other activists we have met. There remains, however, a minority who believes the SARG will only begin to release people if the U.S. pushes the issue in advance of, and as a condition for, re-engagement. END COMMENT.

¶9. (C) Codel Berman did not have a chance to clear this report.

CONNELLY